

e t a

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m g w p

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The Stones of Bourge

‘[...] just keep conversation to a minimum.’

After uttering a sound of confirmation, I let go of a soft pause. Noting the muted call for explanation Richard continued.

‘Well. We mostly collect from those whose husbands or wives have only recently passed. Just don’t set them off, stay neutral. In and out, that’s the idea.’

A woman responded to our knock on the door. After scouting the basement, I began my stretches, loosening up my soon to be fully assumed muscles. Richard adopted the Modulor method of measurement, using his outstretched arm to signal the height of the cases upstairs.

We were there primarily for the pounds of paper; 60 sacks worth we projected. We had driven three hours south of Paris to the city of Bourges. Monique was in the process of downsizing, coordinating the final steps before she made her move. With her husbands passing earlier that year, she had reached the conclusion to part ways with the majority of his collection. It painted a clear portrait; a teacher of English literature, who kept his lesson plans in air-tight sleeves, exercise books were ordered by difficulty and 'key' stages. His interests ranged from Impressionist painters to fashion photographers, from map collecting to Playboy hoarding, he had a thing for boats and fly-fishing. Dr. Seuss had his own dedicated shelf and literary figure Susan Howe, made several appearances, as did the OuLiPo great Jean Lescure.

With my command of the French language at that of a three year old, I was left to only imagine the conversation unfold. An animated Monique was pouring lyrically over what seemed to be a medley of memories. Readily inspired as each touchstone was unearthed from the shelf. With the weight of conversation as lop-sided as I had come to expect. Richard kept quiet, continuing to cypher through, splitting the stones up into two piles.

After a short while a clear ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ pile had begun to emerge. Occasionally picking up a ‘No’ Monique would frantically appear to recite its brilliance, doing her utmost to persuade Richard into reconsidering.

Richard however, was speaking as much with his face as anything else. Silently cushioning Monique's enthused but exhausting tangents; soft smiles met with affirming facial arrangements. As I'd quickly come to learn Richard was an expert in the economy of words; Patiently waiting, then periodically verbalising his response. Releasing three to five word phrases, and in turn gracefully tying up any potential loose-ends in Monique's unfinished anecdotes.

With the absence of word my eyes not ears pricked up. My hunch was that the French language had in some way materialised itself more so in the body. This observation was relatively short lived. I concluded that my awareness had merely elevated due to my verbal ineptitude. But upon my arrival I couldn't help but notice the routing of word in gesture; whether it be in the raising of an eyebrow or the shrugging of shoulders. The multitude of neck movements alone seemed to implicate an assortment of signification I had since overlooked.

My awareness heightened too to those inter-punctual noises, noting their ability to talk, and clearly talk they do. Not quite assigned to a given language, it sits somewhere in the in-between. The emboldened punctuation marks of every day speech, sounds of which words have yet to be fully attributed. In other words those gasps of breath or the diverse delivery of huffs and puffs, the groans, the sighs; those well timed signals we impart with and release during speech. All of which incidentally make a mockery of the printed punctuation mark, however well placed. It was the variety of meaning which became so apparent; after first noting the sigh of doubt, I began to make a list of the various iterations; the exasperating long winded sigh of frustration, the confessional sigh of guilt, the pain reflex, the pleasure reflex, the satisfactory sigh of relief, of disappointment and not least exhaustion. Was this where word began? Harnessed somewhere in-between the realm of the emotional and the physical? So accustomed to these automatisms in daily life—I had turned a blind eye to their significance.

Another house, another collection. Normal for Richard an old hand of the trade if you like. Not immune to the emotional heartache but certainly hardened to it. On the other hand for Monique and I, this was all rather special. This was our first time, albeit an experience made up between two ends.

Not enjoying much return from Richard, Monique quickly turned and for the first time released a smattering of words into my direction. Caught off guard, I was stretching my right thigh, propped up like a flamingo against the back wall. She was holding a heavily dog-eared book by the English novelist Graham Green. What she said lasted for all of thirty seconds—a particularly long time when you don't understand what someone's saying—I imagined she was asking if I had read it. Maybe, if I had enjoyed it. Reluctant to expose myself, I held in a sigh and nodded, brought my right leg down and let her sentence draw to a close. I smiled, hoping rather than believing it would provide the adequate response she was looking for. With her mouth half-open, her eyes began to narrow. It was at which point I realised, this was not 'a smile for an answer' kind of question. Monique's words were in fact open not closed. Thus, I was left with no choice but to reveal myself. I leaned in and uttered the dreaded words 'Parle vu englay, Monique?' Piercing the palpable tension set between us.

The tone turned. A forlorn pensive veil cast across Moniques face. 'Oh, yes' she said warmly. After a moments reflection spent staring into the vacant case, her eyes swept back across the room into my path. Doing my best to strike a chord between professionalism in the lines sight of Richard, and a decent offering of humility. I opted for a somewhat predictable, affirming yet regretful smile. It was quite apparent that Moniques tender tone wasn't directed at me, but rather her late husband. Nevertheless, I could see she was enjoying my company or more precisely, the chance to reacquaint herself with a language not long ago was as solid a fixture as any.

'Pack them flat, keep formats separate;
pocket books in one, quartos in another;
alternate them, spine inside, spine outside.
For pocket books form three columns.
For the larger quartos; start with the biggest.'

Adhering to Richards instructions I knelt down and started sorting through the first of the chosen stones. After a couple of minutes, Monique returned and it had seemed the reality of our visit had begun to take ahold. I started to feel the weight of Monique's past. The baggage if you will, as I gathered and enclosed each touchstone, one after another into the heavy-duty sacks.

Sack 22

Trembling under strain. I clenched my already white-knuckled-fist further. I was struggling to keep a grip of the overpacked sack in my right hand. Without warning; one of the two 'U' shaped handles snapped. Coming away at one end making the 'U' an 'I' clinging on together with all our might. After managing to recover my balance, I made my way up to the van, and took a moment to catch my breath. 'Words are heavy' I told myself.

Thousands, hundreds of thousands in one sack, in one hand. Walking back to the garage I drifted, wondering, indeed was the heaviest? The heaviest word? The heaviest letter?

Thinking as far as I could.

The heaviest letter I thought must be 'I' .

No, 'e'.

Must be 'e' I thought?

Concluding as far as one of the vowels,

I turned my attention to the next set of sacks.

Sack 24

Struggling back-up the driveway, the heaviest word I wondered?

'The', 'and', maybe 'I'?

Did I qualify 'I' as a word?

Sack 38

How far would it reach if I laid each line of text, from each book, from each sack one after another? Would it make its way back to Paris? Perhaps kiss my mothers home on the English coast?

Sack 56

By this point the words were gradually drying up. Those which decorated the walls were now on the floor all but packed away, but most notable were the enclosed words of Monique. Standing in the doorway taking a moment to digest. The enthusiasm which greeted us upon our arrival, had been gradually eclipsed. Sensing her gaze as I continued to load the stones, I turned and met her sorry smile with one of my own. She nodded back with an air of resignation, ushering me to continue on with the last handfuls.

After our arrival back we left a selection of sacks by the front desk to be priced. The following afternoon I finished placing the stones into their designated addresses;

One armful of History,
Two handfuls of World War II,
Two handfuls of Self Help,
Six armfuls of Music,
Eight armfuls of Literature,
One handful of Humour,

‘And these?’

‘Chuck ‘em in the free-box.’

I moved the books outside, where they’d soon be collected by one of the local runners. Who collect and redistribute the books from store to store. The runners or otherwise known as book scouts often arrive early to present their findings. For the most part encumbered and under strain by the heavy load. As happy to depart with the weight as they are to receive payment.

As I deposited the final armful of Monique’s books, a frequented runner I new by face not name approached the box. With no common tongue between us the young man and I as routine, exchanged a nod, and without further ado he crouched down and began to pack the remains of Monique’s stones for the cycle to continue.

The Stones of Bourge
letter count:

e x934	d x316	y x138
t x676	l x282	b x94
a x593	u x234	k x75
o x589	c x219	v x58
i x536	f x202	q x28
n x531	m x193	x x18
s x491	g x181	j x8
r x450	w x161	z x2
h x416	p x147	